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Could Trump be holding Dreamers hostage to make Mexico pay for his border wall?

Luis Gomez Romero

University of Wollongong, lgromero@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

From south of the border, Trump seems to be using DACA as a diplomatic weapon in his ongoing power struggle with the Mexican government. That just hurts 800,000 people and helps President Peña Nieto.

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Is Donald Trump hoping to trade dreams for bricks? Kyle Grillot/Reuters

Author



Luis Gómez Romero

Senior Lecturer in Human Rights,
Constitutional Law and Legal Theory,
University of Wollongong

Fulfilling one of United States president Donald Trump's campaign promises, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions recently announced the end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme. The initiative, launched by former president Barack Obama in 2012, allows people brought to the US illegally as children the temporary right to live, study and work in the country.

DACA protections will begin to expire in six months, giving the US Congress a short window to legislate the now precarious futures of the 787,580 so-called "Dreamers" who currently benefit from the programme.

In Mexico, as in the US, Sessions' announcement was met with distress. Nearly 80% of the programme's recipients were born in Mexico, and ending DACA exposes 618,342 undocumented young Mexicans (as well as 28,371 Salvadorans, 19,792 Guatemalans and 18,262 Hondurans) to deportation. Many in this group, who range in age from 15 to 36, were brought to the US as babies.

There's been some speculation that the US president is using DACA as a bargaining chip. North of the border, commentators think this is about making a deal with Democrats in Congress.

But as a Mexican scholar of US-Mexico political history, I would argue that the DACA decision is more like a power play in Trump's ongoing battle with the government of Mexico. So far President Enrique Peña Nieto has refused the White House's demands that his country pay for the proposed southern border wall. And he only agreed to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement after Trump threatened to withdraw the US from it.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders all but confirmed that Trump sees DACA as a political weapon when she acceded to a reporter's assertion that the administration "seemed to be saying...if we're going to allow Dreamers to stay in this country, we want a wall".

Sanders suggests Trump wants border wall in exchange for letti...



White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders on how DACA relates the proposed US-Mexico border wall.

Either way, I'd contend that Donald Trump is not only holding nearly a million innocent people hostage, trying to exchange dreams for bricks, he's also neglecting the complex history of Mexican migration to the US – a centuries-long tale that, like all national borders, has (at least) two sides.

Where DREAMS come true

Long before Trump ran for president, American politicians blamed Mexico for not doing enough to keep poor citizens from migrating northward. Mexicans, in turn, tend to blame the US for creating the demand for cheap labour.

The two cross-border problems are deeply intertwined. And because the US and Mexico have both benefited from undocumented migration, each country's efforts to control it have been ambiguous at best.

It is true that Mexico's economy has long been unable to provide enough decent work for its people. Though unemployment has ranged from 3% to 4% for the last two decades, underemployment is deep. In 2016, 14.52% of the Mexican labour force was either working fewer than 35 hours per week or being paid under the meagre daily minimum wage (US\$4.50 a day).

For Mexico, then, migration is a safety valve, releasing social tensions that would arise if impoverished migrants stayed home. Mexicans abroad also send large amounts of money to their families in the form of remittances, injecting some US\$27 billion into the Mexican economy last year.

Simple economics, however, teach us that demand begets supply. For generations, the modern US economy has thrived on low-wage Mexican labour. Even when nativism surged under president Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), who signed the Immigration Act of 1917 barring Asian immigration, Congress allowed continued recruitment of Mexicans to till American fields and lay American railroad tracks.

This trend continued throughout the 20th century. In 1942, the US and Mexico jointly instituted the Bracero programme, under which millions of Mexican labourers were hired to work agricultural jobs in the US while many able-bodied American men were off fighting World War II.

While under contract, *braceros* were given housing and paid a minimum wage of thirty cents an hour. By the time the programme ended, in 1964 (nearly two decades after the war's end), the US had sponsored some 5 million border crossings in 24 states.





The Braceros workers came legally to work in the US during World War II. Here, a group of Braceros crossing the border at Mexicali in 1954. Los Angeles Times photographic archive, UCLA Library via Wikimedia Commons

Workers who came into the US illegally were swiftly incorporated into the Bracero system, too. One of the more bizarre practices in the history of US immigration policy was the so-called “drying out” of “wetbacks”, a derogatory official term for undocumented workers.

When the Border Patrol arrested a “wet” worker on a farm, officials would transport him to the border to set foot on Mexican soil – i.e., ritually “deport” him – and then allow him to step back into the US, where he would be hired to work legally as a *bracero*.

Mexicans have been crossing the border ever since, hoping to find the steady work and eventual acceptance that the Bracero programme once offered. In the 1965-1986 period, for example, undocumented Mexicans made approximately 27.9 million entries into the US (offset by 23.3 million departures). In that same period approximately 4.6 million established residence in the country.

Without Bracero-style government support, American citizens and firms have simply employed those migrants under the table. Undocumented Mexicans dominate the US agricultural sector, but they are also construction workers, line cooks, landscapers – even Wall Street brokers and journalists.

In 1986, Ronald Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, a crackdown that promised tighter security at the Mexican border and strict penalties for employers who hired undocumented workers. However, the bill also offered amnesty to immigrants who had entered the country before 1982.

The term “Dreamers” itself refers to another American attempt at immigration reform, the bipartisan Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act of 2001, which would have offered permanent legal residency to young people brought to the US as infants.

That bill was never passed. The Obama administration devised the DACA programme as a compromise to protect those young people, many of whom have never known any country but the US.





Workers have been crossing the US-Mexico border for generations, sometimes with US government support, other times despite a wall. Edgard Garrido/Reuters

Bricks for dreams

Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa once described the border as “*una herida abierta*” – an open wound – where “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds”. The Dreamers are children born of this wound.

Their uncertain fate has moved Mexicans, offering president Peña Nieto a rare chance to occupy the moral high ground. His administration has been ridden by successive scandals for months, including very public corruption and illegal espionage on Mexican citizens.

Peña Nieto conveyed his support for DACA recipients in his September 2 State of the Union address, saying:

I send affectionate greetings to the young beneficiaries of the administrative measure that protects those who arrived as infants to the United States. To all of you, young dreamers, our great recognition, admiration and solidarity without reservations.

He later tweeted that any Dreamers deported to Mexico would be welcomed back “with open arms”, offering them access to credit, education, scholarships and health services.



Enrique Peña Nieto
@EPN

México recibirá con brazos abiertos a los jóvenes que regresen.
El @GobMX les ofrecerá el mayor apoyo para integrarse plenamente al país.

7:45 AM - Sep 6, 2017

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In a statement, the Mexican Foreign Ministry acknowledged its northern neighbour’s sovereign right to determine its immigration policy but expressed “profound regret” that “thousands of young people” have been thrust into a state of turmoil and fear.

Trump seems willing to use any tactic necessary to get his wall built. If the US Congress does finally agree on a way to protect the Dreamers, it will give these young immigrants the American future they deserve, but no wall – be it Mexican-funded or otherwise – will stop other young Mexicans from trying to build their own.

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